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THEOLOGY IN THE CONTEXT OF "NEW WORLD ORDER"

Text of the public lecture given at the auditorium of the Vrije Universiteit on October 7, 1992.

Rede uitgesproken ter gelegenheid van zijn bijzonder hoogleraarschap op de leerstoel Gerechtigheid en bevrijding vanwege de Stichting Dom Helder Camara Leerstoel bij de Faculteit der Godgeleerdheid van de Vrije Universiteit te Amsterdam op 7 oktober 1992.

vrije Universiteit amsterdam



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DE THEOLOGIE

THEOLOGIE
IN THE OCEAN
OF "NEW WORLD" RELIGION

Text of the public lecture given at the University of Amsterdam on October 2, 1902



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INTRODUCTION

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen.

I am honored and grateful for this opportunity today and, especially, for the invitation extended to me by the Board of the Dom Helder Câmara Chair to be a visiting professor and researcher in The Netherlands during this academic year. It is indeed a privilege because of the significance of Dom Helder's life, work and thought. He is a man who truly loves God, the people and the world, and the church.

Dom Helder Câmara has faithfully integrated pastoral presence and action with a firm and consistent prophetic voice of resistance as well as hope. His responsible engagement within his world and culture has always been sustained by a serene, unfailing spirituality. And his wisdom and creativity has helped shape many concepts, views, and approaches today commonly accepted and practiced, from "conscientization" to constructive non-violence in the struggle for life and for justice.

It is in the light of such an inspiration that I invite you to reflect on this topic of Theology in the Context of "New World Order". In the first part - "New World Order" - Alternative Visions - I will discuss the necessary memory of the 500 years (1492-1992) and then refer to certain imperial illusions of new world order; finally, the biblical vision of the reign of God will be highlighted as pertinent, utopian hope. In the second part - Doing Theology in the Culture of "New World Order" - I will restate the contextual nature of Christian theology and then indicate some guidelines for theologically engaging our world. It is my thesis that Christian theology must embrace a mission perspective; and that such perspective points afresh to the call to church renewal and radical discipleship.

"New world order" - Alternative Visions

The Quincentennial (1492-1992): A Necessary Memory

The beginning point for doing theology in the context of "new world order" is a necessary memory. We must look back to focus on the event to be especially evoked only 5 days from today (October 12), the Columbus anniversary. The following anecdote helps to put the significance of that event in historical and theological perspective.

When Pope John Paul II visited Peru a few years ago, a group of Native people who lived high in the Andes mountains requested and were granted a meeting with the pontiff. "We are glad to meet you, Holy Father", they said. "We've brought with us an old Bible that was brought to our mountain communities centuries ago by the first Spanish priests who came here. It has meant a lot to us; we've learned much about love and life from its pages, and we want to thank you for it. But we want to return it to you today, and ask you, along with the people of the First World, of Europe and North America, to read it again. We believe that today you need it more than we do". And they handed the old book over to the Pope¹.

This stunning little story indicates the challenge facing the church and Christian theology today. What do we do now? How will our checkered past inform our future?

Speaking of the 500 years, the Pope has said: "The church wants to approach the celebration of the quincentenary with the humility of truth, without triumphalism or false modesty, but looking only at the truth, in order to give thanks to God for its successes and to draw from its errors motives for projecting herself, renewed, toward the future"².

In Latin America and elsewhere many put the question in contrasting terms: Should there be a joyful celebration, or a painful commemoration? The true significance of the event can be hotly debated. One of the fundamental points of tensions is, of course, that beginning with Columbus, a successful crusade took place. The Christian faith did spread across the Americas.

Throughout 1992 many in the Western world have been and will be celebrating Columbus as a great explorer, a model for humankind and a champion for the faith. The so-called "discovery of America" and the "progress" that came with it is being celebrated with great fanfare. The familiar European version (and also the official story) is caught up in the excitement of exploring a "New World".

The case of Spain itself is very interesting. The Spanish government and the crown have done everything possible to make their country the centre of the world this year of 1992. They want to remind the rest of Europe and the world that Spain was a great power; that once the sun never set on the Spanish empire with the "New World Order" that it established by force. This is for Spain the nostalgic memory of its capacity to create great kingdoms and to change the map of the world. (The Dutch people evoke of course alternative, subversive memories of resistance against the oppressive structures which dominated that old "new world order" in the sixteenth century).

Now the year 1492 was indeed important for Spain, not only for the so-called discovery of America but also for the victory against the Muslims. In fact, exhilarated by triumph in that "holy war", the Spanish monarchs Isabella and Ferdinand continued the mission to "christianize" Europe by expelling the Jews from Spain (or forcing them to convert). It was within that historical context that Columbus was then commissioned to win the "New World" for Spain and for the church.

The impact that Columbus - and those that followed him - had on the native peoples of our continent included enslavement, massacres, rape, pillage and other mistreatment of the existing inhabitants of those lands. In an essay released in Rome last year³, Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff asserts that the conquest of the Americas is like an Easter Friday which has lasted five centuries and which calls for penance and reparation. Boff alludes to the greatest genocide in human history, in which by the end of the sixteenth century, the indigenous population had been reduced to one tenth of its pre-conquest size. He also discusses the violent desintegration of social organizations together with repression of the indigenous religions.

It is a documented fact that when the Spaniards invaded America, they found a continent with hundreds of different peoples and cultures. Some of them, such as the Mayas, the Aztecs, and the Incas, were civilizations which evolved over several thousand years. However, the Spaniards, the Portuguese, the British, the Dutch and others that followed, did not respect or admire those peoples or their cultures, nor did they treat their arrival in the Americas as an "encounter of two worlds". Rather, the Europeans approached the indigenous inhabitants with racist and ethnocentric attitudes, and much greed.

Columbus and many more Europeans of different nations who followed in his wake eventually established a global Christian empire which, many of us believe, still defines and shapes the world in which we live. It is amazing that the globe was made Christian by papal fiat just 40 years after the humiliating defeat of Constantinople at the hands of the Turks! Its leadership shifted among the European powers (Spain, England, Holland), and most recently it has shifted to the Euro-American nation appointed by "divine providence" (so it is believed) to carry out a global work of civilization.

The subversive memory of the quincentennial fortunately includes some points of light. Minority prophetic voices were raised in the midst of the damnable project of conquest, colonization, and christianization on the part of Spain. One such voice, not unlike that of Dom Helder Câmara in the recent years, was Fray Bartolomé de las Casas. Addressing the Council of the Indies in 1565, he wrote:

"All of the conquests were most unjust, the deeds of tyrants; all the reigns and dominions which we have in the Indies are usurped...the king has no more authority to justify the conquests and the wars and robbery that accompany them that have the Turks over against the Christian people. All the treasures gotten in the Indies were stolen. The indian people have the right, which they will retain until the day of judgment, to make a most holy war against us and to wipe us off from the face of the earth"⁴.

Columbus and other European triumphalists were actually unable to *discover* the American nations and cultures in the best sense of the word. They were convinced that an European Christian had nothing to learn about being human from a pagan or infidel. The idea and the impulse was for Christian Europe to extend her dominion over the rest of the world. They were therefore unprepared to recognize the reality of the "new world" of the Americas, let alone the possibility of a truly new world order!

In our times, the last two presidents of the United States personify a similar mindset in this regard; but they have shown a cruder arrogance that uses religion in a way that even the pious Columbus would have found offensive!

The conclusion seems to be that, if humanity is to survive, it will have to reject Christianity unless, that is, a clear separation from empire can be made credible. If Christian faith is to survive in anything like the shape of the faith of Jesus of Nazareth, it will have to separate itself from its imperial alliance which celebrates its 500th anniversary.

New World Order - Illusion and Reality

The dawn of a "new world order" was visualized at the end of the cold war. US president Bush alluded to that in connection with the Gulf war: "What is at stake is a big idea - a new world order where diverse nations are drawn together in common cause to achieve the universal aspirations of mankind - peace and security, freedom, and the rule of law...the world can, therefore, seize this opportunity to fulfill the long-held promise of a new world order"⁵. The disintegration of the Soviet bloc, however, further supported the sense that this "new world order" is being built on an updated version of American manifest destiny.

For its part, the welcome collapse of communism in Eastern Europe has crudely exposed the dimensions of illusion and false prophecy in that communist alternative vision of a new world. Authoritarian, patriarchal socialism, bureaucratic and state-controlled for long clung to the belief in historical determinism and the inevitability of socialism. Illusion is also the marxist conviction that, somehow, the working class would become an agent

of resistance and transformation of the world. As it became patently clear, the reality of the communism that has failed and crumbled is that of a system in which the economy along with other dimensions of social and political life, is replaced altogether by the state administration of material and spiritual life.

European communism did fail, obviously, in the attempt to replace capitalism, especially as it tried to beat the West at its own game. Communism failed also by not being able and willing to creatively transform imperialism and its misanthropic shadow, militarism.

Yes, the collapse of authoritarian, patriarchal socialism is welcome⁶. But from the point of view of the vast majority of the peoples of the world who live under the domination of the Christian empires of the last 500 years it is ominous - because an important challenge has been weakened. We are already observing some shifts.

Christianity is being retooled to serve the empire. Theologians have emerged who praise the virtues of the free market. One of these virtues is claimed to be humility and another is "faith". Humility is understood as the willing acceptance of the dictates of an uncontrolled market, which is like the Holy Spirit which we can feel even if we do not know whence it comes or whither it goes. Faith is the confidence that all will work out in the end for good if we do not interfere with the market, even if in the short term a few million children must die or, in the dominant countries, a few million workers suffer the indignities of unemployment or subemployment. The market requires entrepreneurs who are aggressively or even violently productive, so that must be a Christian virtue as well⁷.

Last year two North American theologians published a "Post-Communist Manifesto"⁸. In it they proclaim once more the "end of ideology", praise capitalist corporations while claiming that socialism is no longer a viable alternative, and propose a public theology to guide and channel a gentler, kinder, reformed capitalism. Once again, grand illusions, false prophecy. Because the *reality* and the projections for the years ahead are alarming. There are no signs that this current world order is willing or able to confront the two most pressing issues facing humanity as we approach the twenty-first century, that is, overcoming the oppression of the poor (soon to become the three-fourth of the world population), and the transition to sustainable societies⁹. Dramatic changes are needed in values, technologies, patterns of production and consumption, to name a few.

Unfortunately, the new world order with its emphasis on militarism, consumerism, debt-induced austerity, and development at the expense of oppressed peoples and overburdened ecosystems may very well accelerate

the destruction of the earth (10).

In the current version of a "new world order" the nature of the principal religious enemy has been radically altered. No longer is it atheism, but a religion (Christian, Jewish, or Muslim, for that matter) that refuses to make God an ally of the empire. After Christianity has conspired as the ideological support of imperial expansion, holocaust, and domination, many question whether Christian faith can be a part of a new and more humane world which the biblical prophets envisioned as a society of justice and peace and true community.

An Alternative Vision

The distinction between illusion and false prophecy (based on self-interest, lack of wisdom), on the one hand, and utopian dream (grounded on hope and hunger for peace and justice), on the other, is for me useful and necessary ¹¹. I believe that biblical faith encourages us to dream of alternative futures; I also believe that the story and the vision embodied in biblical faith can nurture human hope and sparkle the creative imagination for transformation, even in the midst of tragedy and failure.

Massive human suffering and the cry of the people, together with the prophetic witness of Scripture, point indeed to a different vision. It is the alternative vision of a commonwealth of freedom, peace and justice. It is the divine, utopian dream which Jesus Christ embodied, preached and taught about, and actually realized in his own ministry. It is therefore the alternative vision which representatives of Jesus Christ are entrusted to bear in their own life and witness in the world, especially in the face of the culture of empire.

Right here at the Free University, Nicholas Wolterstorff articulated a few years ago a call to refocus social responsibility in light of the biblical vision of *shalom*¹². He calls for a "world-formative" Christianity within the oppressive and repressive economic and political character of the modern world system; a call that is even more relevant and pertinent today, after the end of the cold war. At its highest and its fullest, that biblical vision is a comprehensive guide for discernment which points to peace and justice and the multi-dimensional enjoyment of life: life before God in harmonious relationship, and delight in the service of God; just, solidarious relationship to other humans, and delight in human community, in fact, *shalom* is defined as an ethical community; and right, harmonious relationships with nature and delight in the physical surroundings, the extrahuman environment. The conclusion is then, unavoidable. If "shalom" stands for the politics of God in the world, for God's dream of a commonwealth of freedom, peace and justice,

including the integrity of creation, then that is also the call and the mandate for those who claim to be followers of Jesus. And the top priority agenda is to work in the various dimensions involved in the transformation of the world, especially by resisting injustice and oppression and deprivation, and by creative participation in the search for better futures.

It is a vision and a promise that many Third World Christians have embraced afresh in hope. They have connected it with their own quest for liberation and justice with peace, in their own situations. For example, in the version of Isaiah 65: 17-25:

"For I am about to create new heavens and new earth... Be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating. No more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress. No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime...

They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. (They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat)...

They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity; for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord, and their descendants as well" (Isa. 65: 17-25).

Jesus and his followers were also dreamers and utopians. In other words, people without a secure place in a world of systematic injustice and misery. They can still challenge our moral imagination together with those who belong to their prophetic tradition.

Speaking with a prophetic voice, Dorothee Sölle claims that something flashes up in Christianity which acutely disturbs the culture of money and pleasure, violence and careers in which we now live, and that there is a yearning for something deeper. For Sölle and for liberation theologians, there is another, related conviction: that in each of us is planted something of this utopia envisioned by Christ - that we all together may do the will of God and build a world economic order better than this violent and vicious one, that we may seek a peace other than that based on weapons; that in us lives the desire that the creation of life in this little planet not be ruined or destroyed; that in us is lodged the "breath of God", as it were, that power to hold life and not subordinate it to profit¹³.

Conversely, there is a warning: If we allow the dream of satiating the hungry and working for the liberation of the oppressed to die, we have separated ourselves from the biblical God. While capitalism does not forbid us the dream, it sees to it that we forget it. And when, because of troublesome obstructionist like Isaiah or Jesus, we do not forget, capitalism resorts to a different method: it makes the dream seem ridiculous or absurd. Hence the cultural disdain of utopias.

The dream of daily bread for all is disappearing. It is not on the agenda of the postmodern consciousness. (However, 10 to 20 thousand children in Manila daily need to prostitute themselves to alleviate their hunger; and one thousand brazilian children die evry day; but this has no news value)"... Against this desire to believe and imagine, against love and action that seeks more from life than material comfort for us and our own, our culture pits one sure antidote - cynicism.

The hopeful note, nevertheless, is that this antidote will not function for everyone or forever. Because faith, hope, and love have a quality that is ineradicable... Ultimately, the present reality is not enough to hold... We keep believing, hoping, loving"¹⁴.

So much for a restatement of biblical faith in the prophetic and utopian mode; that is, *faith as the grace-given courage to engage the world*. What about *theology*, then, as a disciplined reflection and commentary upon the engagement of Christian faith? To consider that question we now turn to the next section.

Doing Theology in the Culture of new World Order *(A mission perspective)*

In this second part I will suggest several specific considerations for doing theology within the culture of the socalled "new world order". I will focus on a First World location and perspective, while keeping in mind that this is the reality that many people in the two-thirds world associate with "Christian empires".

I agree with most colleagues in Latin America and elsewhere who underscore the need for socio-political and economic analysis as a key dimension of the theological task in our contemporary context. Nevertheless, I am also convinced that, together with that analysis, an in-depth theological study of the culture as such is long overdue. That is, a serious, disciplined theological engagement with the culture of modernity in the reality of the "new world order" in light of the gospel of the reign of God.

Such an endeavor is crucial in order to further revitalize and reorient not only the theological task as such, but the very mission of the church in today's world as well. I will thus start by restating the inherently contextual nature of Christian theology and will then propose some lines of reflection concerning both, our world and the church.

On the Inherently Contextual Nature of Christian Theology

Third World and liberation theologians have challenged their First World colleagues to acknowledge more explicitly that contextuality is essential in Christian theology. They have defined the theological task as critical and constructive reflection on the praxis of faith, that is, faith's engagement in the midst of history. In the words of a First World theologian, Canadian Douglas John Hall, who has recently responded positively to the challenge:

"To claim that Christian theology is by definition contextual is to insist that the *engagement* of the milieu in which theology is done is as such a dimension of the doing of theology. The attempt to comprehend one's culture - to grasp at some depth its aspiration, its priorities, its anxieties; to discern the dominant ideational motifs of its history; to distinguish its real from its rethorical mores - all this belongs to the theological task as such" ¹⁵.

In fact, Hall also echoes the warning of Latin American theologians that the "most problematic theology, from the stand-point of a faith which wishes to be in a deliberate and consious dialogue with its socio-historical context, is a theology which hides its de facto contextuality under the guise of universality. Those theologies not only discourage the continuous engagement of the concrete situation by the representatives of the gospel, they carry false assumptions about the situation. Those theologies which preclude struggle, on the part of the Christian community, with the elements of their context, in fact end up functioning as *ideologies*. In other words, theological activity must involve a responsible engagement of the context and must develop a critical awareness of the way the church's witness and confession actually operate in its society¹⁶.

Now, contextuality in theology is a matter of both *time* as well as *space*. Awareness of one's location is, therefore, crucial, the actual place where one is called to give a reason for one's hope; regions, nations, "first" and "third" world; also the actual and sociological places of women, or certain minorities, for example, must be seriously considered. Awareness of the greater context of the world itself, especially as politically defined as a "new world order", is still another imperative.

Latin American theologians have consistently proposed and worked under the assumption that Christian theology is contextual, not only because it is a human enterprise, but also because Christian theology assumes that a creative and liberating God is passionately involved in history with a dynamic creation. Further, theology is contextual also to the extent that it is *committed and confessional*. It has a twofold commitment, indeed, to the politics of God as well as to the world that God loves so much. And it is at the same time

confessional because as a task of the church, its mandate is to help the faith community to make its truthful witness in the world.

Contextuality in theory only is self-contradictory. In affluent societies it is perhaps more difficult for Christians to engage their context: a lot of courage and openness to self-criticism is required. We are soon confronted with conflicting testimonies and widely divergent readings of the culture. One has to face the agony of discernment. The faith community which attempts to discern theologically the nature of its socio-historical context, is soon forced to deal with the need to judge and to decide.

Engaging the World - Guidelines

It is precisely that confessional nature of Christian theology that has been recently further highlighted from the perspective of mission praxis and missiological reflection, in Latin America¹⁷ and elsewhere.

Indeed, ongoing discussions in missiological key suggest that the culture of modernity, as a subject of sustained concern, represents one of the most urgent frontiers facing the church in the twenty-first century. Furthermore, the struggles of the church within technocratic culture are thus seen in close connection with the deepening crisis of modernity as it phases into post-modernity. It is becoming increasingly apparent that "the culture of modernity is an unprecedented missionary frontier...

It is the first culture which has had a long encounter with the Christian faith but where for vast numbers of people they live post-Christian lives". At the same time it must be acknowledged that "the non-missionary church of Christendom remains a dominant form of church in modern culture"¹⁸.

It can be argued that the drive to a contextual approach in theology is further - and perhaps definitively - a matter of historical necessity in our time. In current theological discussions, significant voices have articulated the awareness of fundamental shifts within the dominant culture of the West. According to Douglas John Hall, the crisis of the dominant culture of Western societies is a particular expression of the failure of the *modern vision*. And since mainstream Christianity, especially in the First World, allowed itself to be absorbed into modernity, it has not been well prepared or equipped to deal with such a failure¹⁹.

There is a positive note, however, on the other hand. It is that Christian theology is thus forced to become contextual, precisely because the assumptions of our age become more apparent as *assumptions* to be analyzed, challenged or even corrected; where experience no longer conforms to familiar patterns

and the world in which we live is seen as felt more and more as a strange land.

In other words, the Christian faith community may thus more readily humbly embrace the opportunity for creative theologizing and pertinent witness. As always, such creative theologizing will happen more clearly precisely in the points of engagement - confession, mission - on the part of the church. For it is in witness in presence, word and deed, that the faith community encounters the most fundamental and pertinent theological questions (as documented already by Paul and John in the New Testament).

The persistent proposal stemming from mission praxis and theology, invites us to discern anew the actual roots of modern culture in order to better understand it in terms of its origins and development. That task of theological analysis of culture necessitates a twofold movement of "reading" and "judging" culture. And "reading" and "judging" must happen while maintaining dialogue with both world and tradition, dialogue with the sources as well as with the church itself. Indeed, fresh, creative as well as critical approaches to Scripture and to the tradition are indispensable; also it is indispensable to remain engaged with the pluriform testimony of the faith community, the *koinonia*.

How do we further read the culture in order to "test the spirits" and discern the times? In this hermeneutical process, theology must certainly keep counting on the testimony of the most reflective and sensitive people in society: traditionally, these are the philosophers, but even more so artists, poets, novelists, dramatists, musicians and others. These people can indeed help to the extent that they represent in diverse ways the spirit of the time and culture. Among the sensitive and reflective, theology has more recently included and being in conversation with social scientists anthropologists, historians and (increasingly) physical scientists, especially from among the life sciences. Indeed the sciences in general have become partners in dialogue with theology in a way that was not true even a few decades ago. Representatives of other religious communities and faiths are of course also indispensable partners in today's pluralistic scene.

So, the world and culture as a *dimension* of the theological task and also as *object* of discernment contributes itself to the reading and reflection process, the "testing of the spirits in the socio-political context being engaged. But there is more. In fact, from a liberationist and Third World perspective, the most important, indispensable help to discern the times and to test the spirits lies in attending to the oppressed, the excluded, the *victims*. "Who are the victims of our society?" thus also becomes an objective criterion, a key test of authenticity in the difficult, laborious process of theological discernment ²⁰.

The reason for this is manifold, beginning of course with the claim of God's preferential option for the oppressed. Together with that, biblically grounded claim, the very vocation of the church, that is, the call to be in solidarity, especially with the poor, the unemployed, the handicapped, people marginalized or discriminated against because they deviate from "the norm", the powerless, the excluded ones. All of them are indispensable for the faith community and for theology; not only because they are those in and through whom Jesus Christ is concretely, historically present, pleading for liberation and care; they are also indispensable because, without them, there is no sure way to understand our reality. So in order to increase our comprehension of the context, we must be immersed, open and engaged, including of course the painful process of recognizing our own responsibility in the face of injustice and suffering.

Attending to the victims is crucial in the context of First World in a special way both within affluent societies as well as in connection with third world peoples. Do the particular pursuits in our societies create and need victims? If so, what kinds of victims? Does our economic system foster, or even depend on the victimization of certain groups?... How do we deal with the weakest persons, the old, the ill and dying, the fragile folk in our midst most affected by the transactions and adjustments of our political-economic system? And what about those beyond our borders?... the foreigner, the refugee? Do other peoples elsewhere pay the price for our prosperity and security?

It is encouraging that First World systematic theologians can now assert that "(t)he christian church as a whole, and the church in the First World in particular, can no longer allow this criteria for the authenticity of its cultural analysis to function only at the level of practical or applied theology and ethics. No, it has to be taken up in our *systematic* theological reflection as well; otherwise, that theological reflection may very well help legitimize the victimization of the victims either explicitly or implicitly and by default" ²¹.

The incarnate and crucified God of the Christian faith requires that witness as well as theological reflection give priority to those being crucified within or by our political, economic, or cultural structures or systems. Whenever we allow the victims, the poor and oppressed to become a key test of theological authenticity, we have to face further resistance and pain. It is obviously threatening for any of us who participate somehow in the dominant cultures, especially in the First World, because the faithful witness necessarily involves prophetic critique and confrontation, diverse forms of struggle, that is, in other words, cross-bearing for the sake of the gospel.

Theological analysis of the culture.

Closely connected with those considerations, there is another level of analysis we need to practice while doing theology in the context of our "new world order" culture. As indicated before, we must also focus on the fundamental presuppositions, the epistemological foundations on which our Western culture rests. Those foundations and presuppositions must be critically examined from a theological perspective in light of the normative claims of Christian faith regarding the politics of God; normative convictions concerning the vision of shalom. We need to examine those sets of assumptions about the fundamental nature of the universe, history, humankind, people's behavior. In anthropological terms, we need to identify "root metaphors" and "paradigms" which among other things support the belief in the superiority of Western civilization.

Again, I believe it is from the field of mission where we get today a fresh and fertile perspective on the subject as a major contribution to the theological task. Such a contribution can be illustrated with reference to ongoing studies in the United Kingdom in the framework of the program "The Gospel and Culture". Participants in that program share the conviction that there is a need today to deliberately witness to the culture. Thus, key areas of Western culture become foci of analysis in light of the gospel-history, science, epistemology, the arts; and also "second order" subjects such as economics, education, health, and the media²². Let us consider briefly two examples, the areas of history and economics.

In the case of the prevailing views of history, one study²³ analyzes the idea of human *progress* as a favored model of significance common to most Western historians. Confidence in progress, indeed a typically modern and Western viewpoint, is thus exposed as the historian's choice of philosophical commitment. Further, this analysis is done in light of an explicitly Christian metaphysic of history that stresses divine *providence* and *purpose* (that is, the ethical and eschatological horizon God's reign), *morality*, and *grace* (that is, human action seen in an ethical framework in terms of the politics of God, including the claim that this God is involved in the endeavor to make and keep human life human).

The main point of this study is that a Christian understanding of history does present a serious interpretative option.

Further, that this theologically grounded option is often ignored, not because of intrinsic probability but because of two elements in contemporary thinking: the domination of naturalistic and materialistic presuppositions, and the refusal even of historians who would question such assumptions, to venture

outside their academic specialisms.

Similarly pertinent is the discussion of economics in the modern Western world, because the most dominant cultural paradigm is given to us by economics. In fact one can talk of modern culture as economic culture - our lives are dominated by the rituals of "getting" and "spending". For instance, Jane Collier thus analyzes the culture of *economism* ("economism" understood as the imposition of the primacy of economic causes or factors as the main source of meanings and values)²⁴. The basic image in this culture is that of a self-regulating machine which ignores the realities of human needs and relationships. Economism is a culture that encourages us to adopt supposedly value-free attitudes to what happens around us. Collier focuses on the presuppositions of the ideology of free enterprise in the market economy; ideology which forms the basis for current political thinking and policy, not only in the West but, increasingly now in Eastern Europe as well. Also under scrutiny are the cultural interpretations of social values, individualism and self-interest as the vision for society. Thus, welfare (as "more is better"), freedom (as freedom to choose), and justice (as fairness and merit). The consequences of the culture of economism for other cultures, for the environment and so on, are also studied, together with a call to conversion. "Economism" is contrasted with the gospel of peace and justice. And that call is addressed to all, although the primary focus is the faith community within our culture. It is a call to become a more distinctive presence and witness, and to improve dialogue and the prophetic contributions of resistance and critique as well as hope and creativity.

Conclusion: Church Renewal, Radical Discipleship

I mentioned earlier that theology must be seen primarily as a task of the church, as the faith community's self-reflection. Further, because of its confessional nature, theology has the mandate to help the ecclesial community to make its truthful witness in the world. In the context of Western modern culture and the political-economic "new world order", a new theological imagination calls for the renewal of the church and radical discipleship.

As we all now, the earliest Christians made their witness and did their theology from a position of social, political, and economic marginality. From the fourth century onward the church increasingly enjoyed a position of privileged power. Such a position lasted for a long time. In fact, much of the modern church can still be viewed as an extension of Christendom. Hence the legacy of Christendom is crucial for understanding the missionary challenge

that modern and postmodern culture presents. As missiologist Wilbert Shenk puts it, "Western ecclesial reality continues to resist being converted by the diaspora... The church itself must encounter afresh the gospel of the reign of God as a first step in discovering the divine Word for contemporary life"²⁵. Those words certainly echo the gift of the Peruvian Native people in their encounter with the Pope, mentioned at the beginning: "We want to return this Bible to you, and ask you along with the people of the First World in Europe and North America, to read it again..."

A church that so welcomes back its vocation will know and appreciate its culture fully while maintaining a creative tension with it, indeed often a disruptive tension. This will be a church fully incarnated, in solidarity with the people, especially the poor and oppressed, and in the service of disclosing the love and the will of God for all.

This is a call consistent with that of Dom Helder Câmara. Dom Helder believes that justice and peace, shalom, will be achieved through faith, hard work, and persistence of small groups of committed people whom he has called "Abrahamic minorities". They are primarily people of faith and hope willing to take great risks in the face of tremendous odds. "Today and always", he has said, "humanity is led by minorities who hope against hope, as did Abraham".

In the tradition of biblical faith and story, these are people who believe that God is involved in fashioning a new world. They also believe that God wills for a faithful church to be a truthful agent of salvation, liberation and transformation, even in the midst of Christian empires and "new world orders".

NOTES

1. Cited in *ESA Advocate* (January-February 1992) p. 7.
2. Ibid.
3. Leonardo Boff, "Celebracin de la penitencia, celebracin de la resistencia".
4. See Luis N. Rivera Pag n, *Evangelizacin y Violencia: la conquista de América* (San Juan: Cem, 1990) for a thorough study of conquest and evangelization, including an extensive treatment of 16th century Spanish documents.
5. Cited in Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer, *Brave New World Order* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992) p. ix.
6. Latin American liberation theologians, among others, have articulated that welcome while reiterating their political option for a new democratic socialism. See, for example, Leonardo Boff, "A Implosao do Socialismo Autorit rio e a Teologia da Libertacao", *Revista Eclesiástica Brasileira* (Marco 1990) pp. 76-92.
7. For a theological critique of market economy from a Latin American perspective, see Hugo Assmann & Franz Hinkelammert, *A idolatria do mercado. Ensaio sobre economia e teologia* (Sao Paulo: Vozes, 1989); also, Julio de Santa Ana, *La práctica económica como religión. Crítica teológica a la economía política* (San José: DEI, 1991).
8. Max L. Stackhouse and Dennis P. McCann, "A Postcommunist Manifesto" *The Christian Century* (January 16, 1991) pp.44-47. Five responses to the "manifesto", together with a reply by Stackhouse and McCann appeared in the same magazine the following issue (January 23, 1991).
9. Actually, these two pressing challenges - overcoming the oppression of the poor, and the transition to sustainable societies - are often seen as two poles in tension. In terms of ecumenical discussion, the new commitment to the "integrity of creation" stands over against the continuing obligation to struggle for "justice". In the words of Konrad Raiser, the starting point for realizing the complementary relationship between those two poles of tension "must be the insight that the history of humankind is embedded in the history of nature: it is part of the history of life". In, *Ecumenism in Transition. A Paradigm Change in the Ecumenical Movement* (Geneva: WCC, 1991) p. 68.
10. For a probing assessment of the meaning and implications of what U.S. leaders have called a "new world order", from a Third and a First World perspective, see Nelson-Pallmeyer, *Brave New World Order*. For a call to search for a new global vision and path in the decade of the 90's, see Prince Claus, "One World or Several: Towards a Strategy for Growth Sustainability and Solidarity in an Interdependent World". Paper presented at the Society for International Development, 20th World Conference, Amsterdam, May 6-9, 1991.

11. For example, a good illustration of prophetic dream is Martin Luther King Jr.'s belief in the possibility of a better future, as articulated in his "I Have a Dream" address; an example of illusion is the belief that the world can be made safer by developing the "star wars" technology, as claimed by President Reagan.
12. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983).
13. Dorothy Solle, "Moses, Jesus, Marx", *The Other Side* (March - April 1992) p. 26.
14. Ibid.
15. Douglas John Hall, *Thinking the Faith. Christian Theology in a North American Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) p. 75.
16. Ibid., pp. 77-78.
17. See, for instance, Orlando E. Costas, *Christ Outside the Gate* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1982) and *Liberating News: A Theology of Contextual Evangelization* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989); C. Ren Padilla, ed., *The Gospel in Context* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985) and *Mission Between the Times* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986).
18. Wilbert R. Shenk, "The Culture of Modernity as a Missionary Challenge", unpublished paper, p. 16.
19. This is a thesis that Hall develops in *Thinking the Faith*, pp. 158 ff.
20. Ibid., pp. 80, 134-136, 304-306.
21. Ibid., p. 135.
22. See Hugh Montefiore, ed., *The Gospel in Contemporary Culture* (London: Mowbray, 1992).
23. Eric Ives, "The Gospel and History", in Montefiore, *ibid.*, pp. 13-39.
24. Jane Collier, "Contemporary Culture and the Role of Economics", in Montefiore, *ibid.*, pp. 103-128.
25. Wilbert R. Shenk, "Reflections on the Missionary Movement: 1792-1992", *Mission Studies* (ix:1 [17] 1992) p.72.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION AND DIALOGUE

The reader is invited to consider the following questions. They are meant to expand the discussion of certain issues raised in the paper.

1. In the first part of the presentation - "New World Order" - Alternative Visions - there are allusions to *memory* (e.g. Spain's nostalgic memory of its imperial past as well as dangerous and subversive memories of resistance); there are also references to illusions and false prophecy and to prophetic dreams and utopian visions that elicit hope:
 - a) Which are some of the "memories" and "dreams" (or "visions") either prevalent in society or promoted by those in power, the church, or other agencies, in the Netherlands/Western Europe today?
 - b) How can they - or alternative memories and dreams/visions - inform theological reflection from a First World perspective?
 - c) Does your answer to a) and b) relate in some way to the content of the memories and dreams/visions considered in the paper from a Latin American/Third World perspective? If so, how?
2. The author restates the significance of the biblical vision of a commonwealth of freedom, justice and peace (*shalom*) as an alternative to imperial designs of "new world orders" based on false prophecy; he further claims that such a vision (or biblical utopian and prophetic dream) is embraced by many Third World Christians in hope and - together with Nicholas Wolterstorff - that it offers a "comprehensive guide for discernment":
 - a) Do you agree that the biblical vision of shalom can indeed serve to orient responsible, obedient *action* on the part of the Christian community in our time?
 - b) Do you regard such a biblical vision as analogously pertinent for doing theology from a First World perspective as well?
 - c) In light of your historical context, which are some of the key socio-economic and political *mediations* (including presuppositions, values, structures) that en flesh or, at least, point towards the vision - or to the "politics of God" - in concrete terms here and now in Western Europe?
3. The second part - Doing Theology in the Culture of New World Order - starts with a restatement of the inherently *contextual* nature of Christian theology; it then includes guidelines for "engaging the world" as a major dimension of the theological task:
 - a) How does the characterization of Christian theology as *contextual* as well as *confessional* and *committed* compare with your own view (and/or with prevailing views) of theology in Western Europe? Are there significant differences?

- b) What would you consider the main possibilities as well as the potential dangers of (the emphasis on) *contextuality* in theology, from a First World perspective?
 - c) How can culture in the Netherlands/Western Europe be "read" theologically in such a way that theology makes a contribution to: (1) the wider discussion and understanding of modern and post-modern culture; (2) the articulation of faith for the sake of Christian identity, vocation and truthful evangelical confession in today's world?
4. The main (normative) *thesis* of the paper is that Christian theology must embrace a missiological perspective; and that such perspective points afresh to the call to church renewal and radical discipleship:
- a) Do you consider that the thesis is adequately presented and addressed in the presentation? What points or aspects should be added, or what corrections should be made?
 - b) How does mission practice and theology influence the theological agenda in your historical and social context and, more specifically, the dimensions of witnessing to society and culture?
 - c) How is *church renewal* understood and experienced in the Western European context? How does such understanding and experience correlate with *theological* renewal? How does all that compare with Third World perspectives?



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